Old habits, new realities: Central Asia and Russia from the break-up of the USSR to 9/11

Smith, Jeremy

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version
Sammelwerksbeitrag / collection article

Zur Verfügung gestellt in Kooperation mit / provided in cooperation with:
Verlag Barbara Budrich

PART I State Borders: Creation, Consolidation and Challenges

Old Habits, New Realities: Central Asia and Russia from the Break-up of the USSR to 9/11

Jeremy Smith

In the years immediately following the break-up of the USSR, the five new states of Central Asia were the subject of a number of conflicting assumptions and expectations. On the one hand, Russian policy-makers and most Western analysts expected the Central Asian states to remain firmly within the Russian orbit. On the other hand, many commentators expected the region to be one dominated by internal conflicts. Ethnic violence in Osh and the surrounding regions of Kyrgyzstan, civil war in Tajikistan, and the consolidation of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan to the south appeared to confirm the more pessimistic scenarios early on. However, as Neil Robinson has persuasively argued, Central Asia overall has confounded the conflict models forecast by political science and IR studies.[1] In particular, the theory of "democratic peace" and its subsequent refinement, Mansfield and Snyder's theory that states in transition to democracy are more prone to both internal violence and cross-border warfare than either stable democracies or stable authoritarian regimes,[2] suggested that Central Asia and Russia would be more prone to conflict than has been the case.

All five Central Asian states have, to a greater or lesser degree, displayed many of the attributes of a "failed state," associated in political science literature with a high potential for collapse and violence. The geographical grouping of the five Central Asian states with Afghanistan and Pakistan, part of what Zbigniew Brzezinski dubbed the "arc of crisis," has exaggerated expectations of crisis including warfare. But in spite of a number of internal conflicts, to date there has been no international war involving a Central Asian state, and only the occasional distant threat of war. Russian expectations have been equally disappointed. Each Central Asian state has developed its own

1 Neil Robinson, "Why not more conflict in the former USSR? Russia and Central Asia as a zone of relative peace," in *Conflict in the Former USSR*, ed. Matthew Sussex (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 118–145.

2 Edward D. Mansfield and Jack Snyder, *Electing to Fight: Why Emerging Democracies Go to War* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005).

multivector foreign and trade policy, in which China and Europe figure almost as heavily as Russia, with the United States not far behind. Kazakhstan led the way in this multivector approach, with Turkmenistan going it alone with its official policy of "neutrality." Predictions made in the early 1990s about Central Asia tended to be different from those made about Russia and Eastern Europe—but the empirical fact is that assumptions of instability and drift back to some kind of reincarnated USSR for the former were just as inaccurate as assumptions of a smooth transition from authoritarian rule to democracy were for the latter.

Robinson's analysis suggests that at least part of the reason for this is that the preoccupation with regime-building rather than state-building in Central Asia, while weakening state capacity, discouraged leaders from engaging in the kind of nationalist rhetoric and claims arising from border inconsistencies which might have led to wars which they were ill-equipped to engage in. At the same time, the capture by the regime of what resources there were allowed them, to a certain extent, to buy off potential regional foci of opposition, albeit not to the same extent as Boris Yeltsin did in the Russian Federation.

Closer examination suggests, however, that the Central Asian states did engage vigorously in the types of state-building activities which Mansfield and Snyder identify with the cause of conflict between democratizing regimes. A number of the disputes of the 1990s were between the Central Asian states themselves, but disputes between individual Central Asian states and Russia were more common overall. The classic ingredients for conflict between democratizing states as identified by Mansfield and Snyder—weak institutions, pursuit of parochial interests, populism resulting from regime insecurity, and ethno-nationalism—were all present not just in the Central Asian states but in Russia itself.[3] Countervailing factors such as the familiarity of the post-Soviet leaders with each other, engagement in internal conflicts (Tajikistan, Chechnya), and more pressing external ones (Transnistria, Nagorno Karabakh, Afghanistan) and the clear military superiority of one party (Russia), as well as the characteristics identified by Robinson, were at play. But for most Western commentators and observers, it was the general passivity of the Central Asian states, the preoccupation of regimes with internal

[3] Ibid. 60–65.

political struggles, and the readiness to follow Russia's lead that account for the absence of overt conflict.[4]

The record of events as examined in this chapter, however, suggests that even before the end of the Soviet Union, the Central Asian states were far from passive in accepting the shape of the post-Soviet space. Kazakhstan and its president Nursultan Nazarbayev were particularly important in negotiating the form of the break-up of the Soviet Union and in promoting Eurasian unity after it. And all five Central Asian states were not afraid to pursue their particular interests. Disputes arose frequently over three main areas: Borders, collective security arrangements, and the position of ethnic Russians and other ethnic issues. Borders and ethnic politics were frequently issues between Central Asian states, for example Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, but here it is disputes with Russia that is the main focus. One feature that should be pointed out immediately is that in at least one way, these disputes with Russia did impact on relations between the Central Asian states themselves: not only did the five states fail to form any common general or specific strategies in opposing Russia, but on each issue a different constellation of states could be seen aligning themselves for and against the Russian position.

Borders: Free Trade vs. National Security

Although the Central Asian republics are generally viewed as having played a passive role in the events culminating in the break-up of the USSR, their leaderships were not unaware of the direction of developments. During the summer of 1990 the leaders of the Central Asian republics excluding the Tajik SSR reached an agreement that Central Asia was a single cultural unit, but that the existing political arrangement into five entities would remain in place, and they pledged not to challenge any of the existing borders.[5] This agreement signaled the readiness of the leaders to hold the USSR together while preserving their own privileged political status in each of the republics,

---

4 For a typical view of the passivity of the Central Asian republics in 1991, see Dmitri Trenin, *Post-Imperium: A Eurasian Story* (Washington: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2011), 25–26: "Central Asia's five republics…did not secede from the Soviet Union. It was the Union that imploded and abandoned them."

5 Gregory Gleason, *The Central Asian States: Discovering Independence* (Boulder: Westview, 1997).

thus countering the aspirations of the emerging pan-Turkestani movement to create a unified political entity. Kazakhstan's president Nazarbayev confirmed this stance at a press conference at the time of the March 1991 referendum on the preservation of the Soviet Union—Nazarbayev declared Kazakhstan's full support for a continuation of the Union on the basis of a new agreement between sovereign states.[6] This is not to say that Central Asian leaders behaved as if it was "business as usual" as far as the USSR was concerned. The leaders of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan were using the opportunity to increase their own authority and freedom from Moscow. Uzbekistan's President Islam Karimov justified the concentration of power in his own hands with the argument that "the transition period and the explosive situation that has developed in the country and here in our republic demand it."[7] These sentiments were regularly echoed by Nazarbayev who, like Karimov, had already succeeded in combining the posts of President and leader of the Republican Communist Party, as had Turkmenistan's Saparmurat Niyazov, thereby providing an unprecedented basis for personal power.

During the remainder of 1991, Nazarbayev was especially active in supporting Gorbachev's project to keep the USSR together. But his proposals went further than Gorbachev's in seeing the future Union as one between sovereign entities, which would have strengthened self-rule in the republics while reinforcing existing economic and security relations. Even after the failed August coup in Moscow Nazarbayev was the leading initiator of an effort to secure an economic agreement between the Soviet Republics,[8] and he maintained his support for a new Union Agreement as late as December 6, 1991.[9]

Nazarbayev was not a mere observer in this process, he was actively seeking to not only preserve some kind of union, but to shape it to his republic's own advantage, securing greater rights but also a coordinated economic system which he saw as absolutely necessary for the future prosperity of all of the republics. At the same time as supporting Gorbachev's project, however, Nazarbayev hedged his bets by paying careful attention to relations

---

6 E. Matskevich, "Nakanune referenduma," *Izvestiia*, March 13, 1991.

7 M. Berger, "Do vsego dolzhny doiti sami. Beseda s prezidentom Uzbekistana Islamom Karimovym," *Izvestiia*, January 28, 1991.

8 V. Ardaev and E. Matskevich, "Itogi vstrechi v stolitse Kazakhstana prevzoshli vse ozhidaniia," *Izvestiia*, October 2, 1991.

9 Iu. Orlik, "V Srednei Azii i Kazakhstane k obrashcheniiu Gorbacheva otneslis' s ponimaniem," *Izvestiia*, December 6, 1991.

with the RSFSR and its President Boris Yeltsin. Part of his strategy was to act as an intermediary who "…tried very actively to intervene, to bring their (Gorbachev's and Yeltsin's) positions closer together,"[10] in order to increase the chances of the preservation of the Union. But he also worked to develop bilateral relations between Kazakhstan and Russia. Nazarbayev and Yeltsin met in Almaty on August 16–17, 1991, just two days before the coup began. Following this meeting they issued a joint statement of cooperation which included an early commitment to the principle of territorial integrity: "preservation of the territorial integrity of Kazakhstan and the Russian Federation is the most important guarantee for preventing disintegration of the country and its component states."[11] Thus the establishment of bilateral ties between republics was regarded as a means of preserving the Union, but at the same time Nazarbayev came under criticism for such independent actions. As he argued in an April 1991 interview: "The centre does not like our bilateral ties, although strengthening them is nothing more than an endeavor to protect the republics' economies at a time when the management mechanism is falling apart…I am deeply convinced that we can not get along without a Union, and our agreements are a real foundation for a Union Treaty."[12]

Nazarbayev was not alone among Central Asia's leaders in developing bilateral ties. The Central Asian republics made a series of agreements with each other, such as the establishment in August 1991 of an Interrepublic Consultative Council aimed at integrating the five economies.[13] They also individually concluded agreements with other Soviet Republics. In April 1991, Kyrgyzstan agreed a Treaty on Friendship and Cooperation with Ukraine which, along with economic and political provisions, included a commitment by Ukraine's leader Leonid Kravchuk for Ukraine to represent Kyrgyzstan through its seat at the United Nations.[14] At a symbolic level, the move to be represented at the UN by another republic (Belarus was the second republic to have its own UN representation), rather than through the So-

---

10 Valery Simonov and Yevgenia Dotsuk, "Odin iz 'nekotorykh, kto prel'stilsia zapadnymi ideiami'. Nashi korrespondenty beseduiut s Prezidentom Kazakhskoi SSR Nursultanom Nazarbaevym," *Komsomol'skaia Pravda*, April 13, 1991.

11 Vera Kuznetsova, "Rossiia i Kazakhstan: vstrecha v verkhakh nakanune podpisaniia soiuznogo dogovora," *Nezavisimaia Gazeta,* August 17, 1991.

12 Simonov and Dotsuk, "Odin iz 'nekotorykh, kto prel'stilsia zapadnymi ideiami'."

13 "Tashkentskaia vstrecha zavershena," *Izvestiia*, August 15, 1991.

14 Aleksandr Riabushkin, "Interesy Kyrgyzstana v OON predstavliaet Ukraina," *Izvestiia,* April 5, 1991.

viet Union's delegation, demonstrated a clear willingness to move away from the Soviet Union's orbit. Kyrgyz President Askar Akayev also signed a treaty with Yeltsin in July, providing for an 8 million ruble Russian loan and fixed prices for raw materials. In spite of protestations that bilateral ties could go hand in hand with the renewal of the Union, such moves were widely criticized as preparing the ground for the break-up of the Soviet Union. In particular, four of the Central Asian republics (Turkmenistan was not included) were among the prime movers behind a meeting of twelve of the Soviet Union's fifteen republics which met in Moscow in May the day after a meeting to discuss the new Union Treaty, to agree alternative plans for economic and foreign relations on a multilateral basis for 1992. Thus most of the Central Asian republics were preparing for a possibility of the dissolution of the Soviet Union throughout 1991, at the same time as supporting a new Union Treaty to stave off this eventuality.

Establishing the principle of territorial integrity and fending off any possible claims for border adjustments from Russia was a key aim of Nazarbayev's at his meeting with Yeltsin on August 16–17. But it soon became clear that Yeltsin did not share this commitment. At the Almaty meeting Yeltsin declared unequivocally that "there can be no question of our tolerating the seizing of any territory of Kazakhstan in favor of Russia." However, relations deteriorated dramatically following the failure of the coup and an apparent suggestion by Yeltsin that the borders between the republics may need to be revised. A statement signed by Yeltsin's press secretary Pavel Voshchanov stated: "The Russian Federation does not question the constitutional right of every state and people to self-determination. However, there is a problem of borders, a problem that can and may remain unsettled only given the existence of relations of union, codified in an appropriate treaty. If these relations are broken off [in other words, if the USSR ceases to exist—JS], the RSFSR reserves the right to raise the question of reviewing its borders."[15] This prompted Nazarbayev to brand Yeltsin a "great power chauvinist" and to condemn his undemocratic insistence on naming his own appointees to top government posts.[16] However, on August 29 Nazarbayev moved

[15] Statement by the Press Secretary of the President of the Russian SFSR P. Voshchanov, *Rossiiskaia Gazeta*, August 27, 1991, cited in the *Current Digest of the post-Soviet Press*.

[16] "Yeltsin assailed by president of Kazakhstan 'Chauvinist' attitude of Russia decried," *Baltimore Sun*, August 27, 1991, http://articles.baltimoresun.com/1991-08-27/news/1991239056_1_nazarbayev-yeltsin-kazakhstan.

to heal the breach by sending a telegram to Yeltsin, in response to which Russian vice-President Alexander Rutskoy travelled immediately to Almaty. There, Rutskoy and Nazarbayev signed thirty agreements covering the economy, collective security, and the rights of citizens and territorial integrity. At a press conference afterwards, Rutskoy explained his boss' earlier comments on borders as referring to the need for a general demarcation of inter-state borders on the basis of international norms.[17]

As soon as the dissolution of the Soviet Union became inevitable following the Belovezh accords between Russia, Ukraine and Belarus, the Central Asian states were quick not just to join in but to influence the creation of the Commonwealth of Independent States which would replace the USSR. At meetings in Ashgabat and Almaty on December 13 and 14, alternative resolutions were tabled by Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, but differences were only on technical details. All five Central Asian states insisted, successfully, that they would only join the CIS on the basis that they were considered as founder members, rather than as latecomers who were joining the original three Slavic states. They also referred to the CIS as a "Eurasian" union, a term that was not used at Belovezhskaya pushcha.[18] Thus the Central Asian republics, while they continued to support the preservation of the Soviet Union until the last possible moment, also worked vigorously to shape its future and, once the dissolution had become inevitable, the future of the CIS. In particular, Nazarbayev's condemnation of Yeltsin's threat in August 1991 to revise state borders and his vigorous insistence on the principle of territorial integrity thereafter,[19] ensured that the break-up of the USSR would, for the most part, be achieved without sparking damaging disputes over territory.

Through this process, Nazarbayev and other Central Asian leaders were looking to get the best of both worlds. On the one hand, they wanted to achieve the sovereignty for their republic which would allow them to follow nation-building projects through to the end and escape the personal humiliation encountered on being constantly reminded of their subordination to

---

17 Vladimir Desiatov, "Kazakhstan: Rutskogo v Alma-ate zhdali," *Nezavisimaia Gazeta*, August 31, 1991.

18 V. Ardaev, "Itogi Ashkhabadskoi vstrechi vyzvali vzdokh oblegcheniia: v strane i mire eshche odna nadezhda," *Izvestiia*, December 14, 1991.

19 V. Kononenko, "Rukovoditeli pravitel'stv SNG obsuzhdaiut voprosy ekonomicheskogo razvitiia," *Izvestiia*, December 24, 1991.

Moscow;[20] on the other hand, they would preserve the close economic interaction which was essential for their countries' prosperity. As long as these two aims were achieved, the question of whether this should happen within the context of Gorbachev's renewed Union or through multilateral and bilateral arrangements between independent states was of no overriding importance. It was not necessarily the choice of the Central Asian republics for the USSR to disappear, but once this became reality, they were ready to make the most of it.

The two key aims of state sovereignty and economic union, while not exactly contradictory, led to tensions which were in evidence through the course of 1991 and 1992. Yeltsin's ambivalent attitude to the integrity of existing borders in August 1991 has already been noted, and his insistence on Russia's special place in the security structure of the CIS and its responsibility for Russians living outside the borders of the Russian Federation (see below) also allowed for a flexible attitude to the new international borders. One implication of the hardening of republic borders into international borders had already been seen in the Osh region of Kyrgyzstan in 1990: the more closed borders became, the more they were identified with a particular ethnic group, and the more politicized ethnic relations became. In and around Osh and other towns on the Kyrgyz-Uzbek border, ethnic violence in the summer of 1990 reflected, at least in part, fears over the implications of newly acquired sovereignty for ethnic minorities.

While the revival of the Cossack movement and of Russian nationalism in general did lead to some unrest along Central Asia's northern border with Russia, fears of similar bloodshed proved unfounded and this was not the main concern. Although Nazarbayev was committed to the belief that an open trade border with Russia was indispensable for Kazakhstan, he was already keenly aware of the dangers of being subject to an economic system over which he had no control. Before the break-up of the USSR, the RSFSR's unilateral decisions on price rises or price liberalization led to goods flowing across the border from Kazakhstan and worsening shortages there. In response, Nazarbayev ordered the establishment of customs posts on the border for a short period in September 1991.

[20] See Valery Tishkov, *Ethnicity, Nationalism and Conflict in and after the Soviet Union: The Mind Aflame* (London: Sage, 1997), 44–45.

Although the principle of free trade was consistently agreed on by the CIS states, the temptation to follow protectionist policies proved hard to resist. On January 16, 1992, Kazakhstan and Russia signed an agreement On Removing Constraints in Economic Activity, which provided for the free movement of goods, services, labor and finance. Shortly afterwards, however, the Russian Federation set up customs points along the Kazakh border, leading to loud protests from Kazakhstan. When Kazakhstan in turn attempted to establish a customs regime with Russia in the summer of the same year, Russia responded by raising the price of energy exports to Kazakhstan until Nazarbayev backed down.

The logic behind the sporadic strengthening of the border regimes between CIS states who were supposed to have signed up to the free passage of goods and peoples across borders was outlined by Yeltsin at a meeting of his government on June 4, 1992. The transportation across borders of stolen goods, most seriously of firearms, was showing a rapid increase and was set to keep growing, according to experts. As well as arms entering Russia, reports from the Ministry of Culture of the disappearance of large numbers of icons and other cultural artifacts meant that traffic across the border was in need of control in both directions. Central Asian countries were picked out for having instituted visa-free agreements with non-CIS countries, which meant effectively that people could pass from the outside world to Russia and *vice versa* without any effective controls.[21]

The desire for free trade was in competition with a concept of international borders which, in the Soviet experience, were always hard to cross. In addition, the security and inviolability of national borders were an important part of the legitimization of the new state and were closely linked to the idea of nations as they were conceived across the post-Soviet states. As a result of this symbolic nation-building role of borders as well as the difficulties already encountered with Russia and other neighbors in the course of 1992, the Law on Borders passed by the Parliament of Kazakhstan in December 1992 and coming into force in 1993 was based on a very hard concept of borders. In discussions during the drafting of the law, the Border Guards' Service went as far as insisting on a right to close the border altogether in case of the

[21] Vasilii Kononenko, "Rossiia pristupaet k ukrepleniiu svoikh granits," *Izvestiia*, June 4, 1992.

threat of disease epidemics or other emergencies.[22] Such a provision was not included in the final law, but the border forces did have almost unlimited rights to use weapons. The preamble to the law made clear the importance of the border to the nation of Kazakhstan, and its tone had much more to do with the defense of a border that divided the country from others, than it had about the free transport of goods. The final version of the law went further than previous drafts in establishing "border zones" at some distance from the border crossing points, which could be entered only by citizens with a special permit.[23]

Russia's border regime underwent similar developments, and while in principle international agreements were (as stated in the Kazakh law) to take precedence over national law, the reality was that neither side was ready consistently to abide by obligations, and the nature of the border swung first one way and then another. Things came to a head at the beginning of 1997, when Russia deployed Cossack units along the border with Kazakhstan, with the power to check documents and search the baggage of anyone crossing the border into Russia.[24] This move led to a downturn in Russian-Kazakh relations that lasted over a year.

Russia justified the move as necessary to curtail drug trafficking and smuggling. By the early 2000s such concerns had hardened, and in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 international terrorism was added as an even more pressing reason to increase the security of the border. Not for the first time, growing concerns over security coincided with moves to further promote regional economic integration, which became increasingly focused on Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan, which were to go on to become the founder members of the Eurasian Customs Union, rather than the whole CIS. But that integration process was and still is hampered by the emergence by the beginning of the millennium of two incompatible discourses: one emphasized free trade, local cross-border cooperation in services, and cultural exchange; while the other emphasized the need to control drugs, terrorists, contraband, illegal migrants, and arms.

---

22 Natsional'nii arkhiv Respubliki Kazakhstan (National Archive of the Republic of Kazakhstan—hereafter NARK), f.2, op.1, d.79, ll.142, 146.

23 NARK f.2, op.1, d.115, ll. 161–179.

24 Mikhail Alexandrov, *Uneasy Alliance: Relations Between Russia and Kazakhstan in the Post-Soviet Era, 1992–1997* (Westport: Praeger, 1999), 141.

Disputed Borders—the Caspian Sea

A different kind of border dispute emerged over the Caspian Sea. Here, as well as Russia and the Central Asian states of Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan and Iran were involved. Previously the sea had been governed by a 1921 treaty between Soviet Russia and Iran, and a 1940 treaty between the USSR and Iran. Iran and the Russian Federation now argued that the terms of this treaty still applied and should be adopted by the four new states which were successors to the Soviet Union and, as agreed at the end of 1991, which were bound by the Soviet Union's international obligations. Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan argued, however, that the earlier treaties could no longer be deemed valid now that there were five littoral states instead of two, and that the Caspian should be governed according to international maritime law.

There were significant geopolitical and economic issues at stake. Firstly, Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan were keen to secure and develop the shipping route between Aktau and Baku, which could be used for oil and gas tankers to transport Kazakh and Turkmen energy resources through Azerbaijan and Georgia on to Europe without using Russian pipelines. But there was not much difference between the five states in terms of supporting the right of free navigation. The real issue which divided them was the exploitation of natural resources under the seabed. The significance of oil and gas deposits was becoming clear soon after the end of the Soviet Union, making the question of rights and ownership a crucial one. Under the Russian-Iranian proposals, the sea was treated as a common resource apart from a ten-mile fishing zone, with joint control over the exploitation of oil and gas. By contrast applying maritime law would have divided most of the sea up into zones controlled by each country according to the extent of their shorelines. The latter was clearly to Russia's disadvantage as the heaviest concentration of resources was in the more southern parts of the sea. It may also be that, while the geopolitics of energy were not as prominent in the early 1990s as in the 2000s, Russian policymakers were aware of the significance of a possible energy transit route which bypassed Russia.

Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan's legal case that the sea should come under international maritime law rested in part on an unconvincing argument that the Caspian was connected to the high seas through the Don-Volga river system. On the other hand, the United States, in pursuit of its own interests and

anxious to limit Russian power, was supportive of the Azerbaijani-Kazakh position. Things seemed to swing decisively in the direction of Russia and Iran in 1996, however, when Turkmenistan lent them its full support.[25]

As Russia, Iran and Turkmenistan pressed ahead with tripartite agreements on sharing resources in the sea, Kazakhstan, with the support of Azerbaijan, continued to insist on a full new agreement, rejecting concessions offered by Russia to allow for each state to claim exclusive ownership over a 45-mile strip along their coastlines. Nazarbayev's persistence appeared to have paid off when, in July 1998, he reached an agreement with Yeltsin to divide the northern seabed between Kazakhstan and Russia.[26] Russia did not stick by this commitment however, and today the status of the Caspian sea is hardly closer to being resolved than it was in 1994.

Security—from Common Space to National Defense

Russia was widely expected to play a major role in the security situation in Central Asia, generally because it seemed intent on maintaining its ties with its former peripheries, and specifically because of the abundance of military bases, including nuclear installations, in the region. A plethora of security-related treaties and agreements were signed between Russia and the Central Asian states in the first half of the 1990s, but in reality financial pressures meant that Russia was unable to live up to many of its commitments and to implement the desired new security arrangements.[27] But this is not to say that Russia did not engage in the security situation in Central Asia, especially as long as the civil war in Tajikistan was raging, or that security arrangements were not a source of contention between Russia and the Central Asian states.

The assumption that Russia would take responsibility for the collective security of the whole of the former Soviet Union—or at least those parts of it that entered into the CIS—was embedded in the agreements that accompanied the Soviet break-up. These were more than mere declarations as far as Central Asia was concerned, especially once the neo-Eurasianists in Yeltsin's

25 Alexandrov, *Uneasy Alliance*, 282–93.

26 Vladimir Isachenkov, "Yeltsin, Nazarbayev sign Caspian Pact," *The Moscow Times*, July 7, 1998.

27 Lena Jonson and Roy Allison, *Central Asian Security: the New International Context* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2001), 2.

entourage had taken control of most aspects of Russian foreign policy around the middle of 1992. This coincided with an escalation of hostilities in Tajikistan and a more concerted effort on the part of Central Asia's leaders to ensure Russia live up to its security commitments in the region. The result of these pressures was the signing of a Treaty on Collective Security by Kazakhstan, Russia, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Armenia in Tashkent on May 15, 1992. The treaty referred to the external borders of the CIS as common external borders, and therefore subject to defense by a CIS force which in practice came under Russian command. The dispatch of a further 1200 CIS forces to the border between Tajikistan and Afghanistan in July was one of the first consequences of this arrangement. The concern here was not with Tajikistan's internal conflict but with the collapse of the regime in Afghanistan and the emergence of Taliban and other Islamist forces there.

This did not, however, mean that Russian or Russian-led forces in the guise of CIS "blue helmets" were not a part of the military balance in the Tajik Civil War. Initially Russia's involvement was promised jointly with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, assuring support for the current Tajik leadership but urging responsibility.[28] However, in November 1992, following the failure of Russia's Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev to secure the support of the Kulyab faction for a coalition government in Tajikistan, Russia threw its weight behind the government of Emomali Rakhmonov and sanctioned the use of the 201st Motorized Infantry Division (which had been stationed in Tajikistan since autumn 1945) "to keep order" and played an active military role from then on.[29]

A few days after these developments, Kozyrev provided some insights into his thinking on the role of Russia in the region in an interview with *Nezavisimaia Gazeta*: "Russia's total withdrawal from Tajikistan would be detrimental to Russia's national interests and a betrayal of our neighbours (I mean the Tajiks). We must also remember that Russians live there…Russia must act as a peacemaker. Russia's current geopolitical interests in Central Asia do not involve a struggle for a sphere of influence. In order to protect

---

28 "Nazarbaev, Akaev, Karimov i El'tsin pishut rukovodstvu Tadzhikistana: Tadzhikskoe rukovodstvo pishet El'tsinu," *Nezavisimaia Gazeta,* September 5, 1992.

29 Igor' Rotar', "Dva dnia Andreia Kozyreva," *Nezavisimaia Gazeta,* November 7, 1992. On Russia's and other countries' role in the Tajik Civil War, see further the chapter by Rytövuori-Apunen and Usmonov in this volume.

Russia's borders, we must try to achieve political stability in the states of Central Asia."[30]

Kozyrev and Yeltsin's perception of Russia's security role therefore had three elements: defense of the common external CIS border, internal security of each regime (with some option for backing one side or the other where there was more than one contender for leading the regime), and a special responsibility for the protection of the ethnic Russian population in the former Soviet republics. The all-encompassing nature of this role, and its links to Russia's own national interests, was underlined by Yeltsin in a speech in February 1993: "Stopping all armed conflicts in the territory of the former USSR is Russia's vital interest. The world community sees more and more clearly Russia's special responsibility in this difficult undertaking…"[31] What made this position controversial in the Central Asian context was that, while there was initially a general consensus over Russia's special role in CIS security, not all states agreed with Russia as to what that role should cover.

The single CIS army that had been promised as the key ingredient of a collective security strategy soon ran into objections from CIS members. Ukraine, Moldova and Azerbaijan never signed up to the idea of a unified joint command of CIS forces, which was agreed by the remaining CIS states (Belarus, Georgia, Armenia and the Central Asian republics minus Turkmenistan) at the Minsk summit of December 30, 1991. But even at that early stage, the right of each member to form its own army was kept open, threatening the whole idea of a single collective security arrangement. In the short term, however, individual states other than Russia were in no position to form such armies. Kazakhstan's President Nazarbayev was the most ardent champion of a unified military. But even his support was tempered by Russia's attitude. Yeltsin's insistence in January 1992, shortly after Russia became a separate state, that all military personnel swear a new oath of allegiance to the Russian Federation regardless of which republic they were stationed in, was immediately attacked by Nazarbayev, who preferred maintaining the previous oath to the now defunct USSR. This dispute underlined the central problem with maintaining a unified military rather than separate na-

---

30 Igor' Rotar', "Moskva pytaetsia pogasit' Tadzhikskuiu mezhdousobitsu," *Nezavisimaia Gazeta,* November 11, 1992.

31 Cited in Mohiaddin Mesbahi, "Russia and the Geopolitics of the Muslim South," in *Central Asia and the Caucasus after the Soviet Union*, ed. Mohiaddin Mesbahi (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1994), 305.

tional armies. All of the post-Soviet states, Russia included, were actively engaged in a nation-building project in which, as we have already seen, territory and sovereignty played a major part.[32] In spite of Nazarbayev's enthusiasm, the notion that armed forces controlled by another country or group of countries should be stationed within the borders of a sovereign state never sat easily with such a project. For countries like Ukraine which were also distrustful of Russian intentions, the objections were more than statements of a principle of sovereign statehood. For these reasons the project for a fully unified military command lasted only until April 4, 1992, when the Russian Federation announced it was creating its own national army, and within a month the Central Asian states had started to follow suit.

One of the reasons for the failure of the early collective security arrangements to stick was the perception of an arrogant attitude on the part of Russian military commanders. In July 1992, precisely as agreement was being reached between Russia and Turkmenistan over a joint command for Turkmenistan's border troops, Russian officers raised objections to the recruitment of Turkmen border guards to work alongside the Russian troops already in place, which this agreement entailed. Referring to the numerous tasks a border guard was expected to carry out Nikolai Reznichenko, the chief of the Border Defense Department of the Central Asian Border district, claimed "[t]he Turkmens, we have become convinced, are not yet capable of doing all these things…But when it comes to desertion and violating regulations, they are masters."[33] Only weeks later, Turkmenistan declared it was setting up its own border guard without any agreement on joint command, and cited Yeltsin's desire for greater control as the reason for withdrawing from joint arrangements.[34] Similar feelings were expressed when Uzbekistan quit the Collective Security Treaty seven years later, claiming objections to "Russia's military activities in certain CIS states" and blaming Russian heavy-handedness.[35]

---

32 See also Elizabeth Teague, "Citizenship, Borders, and National Identity," in *Russia's Engagement with the West*, ed. Alexander J. Motyl, Blair A. Ruble, and Lilia Shevtsova (Armonk: Sharpe, 2005), 17–32.

33 Vladimir Kuleshov, "Sozdaiutsia sovmestnye pogranvoiska," *Izvestiia*, July 28, 1992.

34 Igor' Zhukov, "Turkmenia: nezavisimaia strana dolzhna sama okhraniat' svoi granitsy. Prezident Niiazov opredelil status pogranvoisk," *Nezavisimaia Gazeta,* August 14, 1992.

35 Vladimir Georgiev, "Uzbekistan zanial osobuiu pozitsiiu. Tashkent gotov vyiti iz Dogovora o kollektivnoi bezopasnosti," *Nezavisimaia Gazeta,* February 4, 1999.

By the middle of the 1990s a gap had clearly opened up between Russia and the Central Asian states over their respective understandings of Russia's role in the region. Differences went back at least to the end of 1991 when the leaders of the three Slavic republics met at Belovezhskaya Pushcha and decided on the dissolution of the USSR. According to Nazarbayev, he was not invited to these talks although he was in Moscow at the time, and instead was asked afterwards to sign the agreement already made, something which he refused.[36] Although the Central Asian leaders were able to succeed in achieving equal status with Russia, Ukraine and Belarus in the founding documents of the CIS, they had little possibility of challenging the Russian assumption of responsibility for security arrangements and broad political influence in the region: Central Asia had no military units of its own, and while it could call on conscripts from each republic it lacked any trained officers and the financial means or infrastructure. The leaders of the new states also faced political uncertainty and challenges to their own position. What Russian politicians seem to have underestimated was the fact that by the middle of the decade, that uncertainty had receded. Each country now had a strong president who was vigorously engaged in building up their land as a nation-state as well as reinforcing the legitimacy of their regimes and launching varying degrees of personality cult. Standing up to Russia, or at least not fawning to Moscow, was an important way of reaching each of these three ends. By 1995 Kozyrev appears to have taken some, but not all, of this on board. Now he was talking about "gathering" the former Soviet republics together using Russia's military influence, which had been exercised in resolving Tajikistan's civil war and could now be consolidated through the establishment of military bases throughout Central Asia.[37] But by mid-1999 Russian plans for a new, permanent, military base in Tajikistan had been dropped, and even Russian border guards had been ejected from one country after another, apart from Tajikistan where they remained continuously up until 2005. As border guards departed Kyrgyzstan in May 1999, they were pursued by hostile crowds hurling abuse.[38]

---

36 N. Zhelnorova, "Politicians answer for everything," *Argumenty i Fakty*, no. 2, January 1993, cited in the *Current Digest of the post-Soviet Press*.

37 Boris Vinogradov, "S vvedeniem natsional'nykh valiut v aziatskikh stranakh SNG v Rossii voznikli novye problemy," *Izvestiia*, November 20, 1993.

38 Aleksandr Chuikov, "Ukhodim: Rossiiskie pogranichniki pokidaiut Kirgiziiu v chem mat' rodila," *Izvestiia,* May 6, 1999.

As well as losing its military presence and vision of Russian-led collective security, between 1993 and 1995 Russia witnessed each of the Central Asian countries withdrawing from the ruble zone and introducing their own currencies. This was linked, in the eyes of Russian nationalists in particular but also in concerns raised by Kozyrev, to the apparent deterioration in the situation of ethnic Russians in Central Asia (see next section).[39] Turkmenistan continued to be closely tied to Russia and was the only country to reach an agreement on dual citizenship, largely because of its dependence on Russia's gas pipelines for its own exports; but even here there were differences over the nature of the energy relationship.[40] Nazarbayev repeatedly raised his vision of a Eurasian Union and in 1995 was even ready to return to the idea of joint military forces,[41] but the clear trend by the middle of the decade was for the Central Asian states to march to their own tune, much to the disappointment of Russian politicians and nationalists. From 1995 onwards high level contacts continued on a regular basis, but agreements tended to be restricted to trade and energy matters.

A renewed security role for Russia in the region was back on the cards as a result of events in the second half of 1999. Terror attacks in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, blamed on Islamic extremist Wahhabis, were linked by Russia's new Prime Minister Vladimir Putin to his own renewed war on Chechen terrorism. Putin promised support to Kyrgyzstan, received a standing ovation from Tajikistan's Parliament on a state visit there, and signed a new security agreement with Uzbekistan only ten months after Karimov had denounced Russia's military role. Putin declared that "Russia does not intend to declare any of the CIS countries to be zones of Russian strategic interests, for that would be inconsistent with our political tradition." Instead, he proposed a series of bilateral "strategic partnerships."[42] Global events had conspired to allow Russia to replace its stance of unquestioning military dominance in the region with a more equal relationship based on a campaign which was soon to embrace the Western world as well—the International War on Terror.

---

39 Vinogradov, "S vvedeniem natsional'nykh valiut"; Lerman Usmanov, "Posleduet li za razvalom rublevoi zony raspad sodruzhestva," *Nezavisimaia Gazeta,* December 15, 1993.

40 "Vstrechi v Ashgabade," *Nezavisimaia Gazeta,* December 24, 1993.

41 Boris Sherman, "Rossiia i Kazakhstan sozdadut Ob''edinennye vooruzhennye sily," *Segonia*, January 21, 1995.

42 Leonid Panin, Yurii Stepanov, and Igor Shestakov, "Rossiia pomozhet Kirgizii razbit' islamistov," *Kommersant*, September 2, 1999; Arkadii Dubnov, "Rossiia khochet byt' 'neporochnoi'," *Vremia MN*, December 16, 1999.

Ethnic Russians

In addition to the border issues discussed above, the large numbers of Russians now living outside of the borders of the Russian Federation after the break-up of the USSR constituted an important element in Russia's foreign policy. Russia's self-proclaimed right to protect ethnic Russians beyond its borders played some role in Russia's engagement in Tajikistan, where Russians made up 7.6 percent of the population in 1989.[43] As already noted above, in November 1992, Kozyrev justified Russian intervention in Tajikistan in part on the fact that "[w]e must also remember that Russians live there…Russia must act as a peacemaker."[44] Otherwise, the plight of ethnic Russians did not lead to any military or other direct cross-border activities in the 1990s. The Russian authorities did, however, use two other tools more regularly. One was to put direct pressure on governments to ensure the rights of Russians. These could be linked to international agreements or other forms of cooperation from Russia. Even before the end of the Soviet Union, in July 1991 a treaty signed between the RSFSR and Kyrgyzstan linked a loan of 800 million rubles to a guarantee of the rights of the populations of each other's republics.[45] In 1995, economic agreements made between Yeltsin and Niyazov were also linked to the protection of Russians in Turkmenistan.[46] The second tool was to provide direct material, financial and political backing to Russian organizations in the former Soviet states. In the first post-Soviet years, such efforts were focused especially on Cossack groups in Ukraine and northern Kazakhstan. In 1993–1994, the status of Cossack organizations became a source of some tension between Moscow and Almaty, as Cossacks in northern Kazakhstan declared their own regional self-rule and the Russian Ministry of Justice registered a "Siberian Cossack Force" which had four of its sixteen subdivisions in Kazakhstan. The Kazakh authorities responded by refusing to register any Cossack organizations until a compromise was reached whereby some Cossack organizations were registered with the proviso that they were not military formations.[47]

---

43 Robert J. Kaiser, *The Geography of Nationalism in Russia and the USSR* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 174.
44 Rotar', "Moskva pytaetsia pogasit'."
45 Aleksandr Riabushkin, "Dogovor Rossii i Kyrgyzstana," *Izvestiia,* July 22, 1991.
46 Aleksandr Koretskii, "Vizit Turkmenbashi v Moskvu," *Kommersant*, May 19, 1995.
47 Alexandrov, *Uneasy Alliance*, 121–22.

Russia also sought to extend the concept of citizenship on an ethnic basis to Russians abroad. A June 1993 amendment to the citizenship law allowed qualified people to obtain Russian citizenship even if such individuals had already acquired citizenship in another country. The right to dual citizenship was enshrined in Yeltsin's constitution that was brought in later the same year. This dual citizenship was at odds with practices elsewhere in the former Soviet Union (and in the Russian Federation before June 1993), and raised fears that substantial portions of the population in countries like Kazakhstan would be encouraged to develop their identification with the Russian state at the expense of the nation-building and state-building projects of Kazakhstan. Despite strong pressure from Russia to sign bilateral treaties on dual citizenship, Turkmenistan was the only Central Asian state that Russia was able to prevail on.[48] Even in that case, Turkmenistan repealed its agreement in 2003. The Central Asian states were equally cool about a Russian proposal in 1994 to create a common citizenship for CIS members.[49]

Rhetoric about the plight of Russians in Central Asia surfaced in the Russian press in response to new language laws and perceived discrimination against Russians. Concerns were highest in relation to Kazakhstan, where almost 4.5 million ethnic Russians remained by 1999 (down from 6.2 million in 1989). The language laws of 1989 and 1995, which relegated the Russian language to second place behind Kazakh while remaining an official language, were a constant source of protest. The move of the capital of Kazakhstan from Almaty to Astana (formerly Akmola), on the edge of the predominantly Russian regions of northern Kazakhstan, in 1997 was widely interpreted in Russia as a move designed to keep an eye on those regions.[50] Press reports complained regularly of the rewriting of history in Kazakhstan to portray negative aspects of Imperial Russian rule, and linked this to discrimination against Russians.[51] In November 1993, in the wake of the collapse of the ruble zone, Kozyrev toured the Central Asian states with the main aim of highlighting the plight of ethnic Russians.[52] While official concerns about ethnic Russians generally became more muted after the mid-1990s, the issue

48 "Vstrechi v Ashgabade."
49 Teague, "Citizenship, Borders, and National Identity," 22.
50 John Glenn, *The Soviet Legacy in Central Asia* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999), 111–13.
51 Vladimir Moiseev, "Sovremennaia istoriografiia Kazakhstana," *Nezavisimaia Gazeta*, April 20, 1993.
52 Vinogradov, "S vvedeniem natsional'nykh valiut."

remained a popular one for Russian nationalists as well as Russian and Cossack groups within the region.

Conclusion

The suddenness of the dissolution of the USSR left little time for the preparation of concrete visions of the post-Soviet order. The perception that it was Yeltsin and Russia that had brought about the end of communism and that the Central Asian states were late arrivers in the process reinforced the assumption that they would continue to operate firmly within Russia's orbit. But this assumption underestimated the readiness of Central Asian leaders to push forward with their own state building, and the collapse of Russia's economy propelled them to look in different directions for their economic relations—to China, South Asia and the European Union.

Central Asian governments, each at its own pace, were able to remove themselves from the Russian orbit without fear of serious consequences. In the mid-1990s, Russia was embroiled in the Chechen War, was struggling to overcome its economic difficulties and the consequences of the 1993 political crisis, and was at odds with the West over NATO expansion, Kosovo, and the pace of economic and democratic reform. Russia's deficit of power provided the opportunity, and a number of factors provided the incentive. In addition to geopolitical and economic realities, each of the Central Asian leaders had now embarked on a strategy of state and nation-building centered on the cult of the President, and standing up to Russia and promoting the national language and culture were central to that strategy.

By 1995, the reality that, in relation to Central Asia, the Soviet Union really had come to an end finally hit home, to a chorus of bitter recriminations. The influential Chair of the Duma Committee on International Affairs, Vladimir Lukin, noted "[b]eyond Kazakhstan, nothing is clear…this creates a completely unprotected country. Completely unmonitored with respect to narcotics, arms dealing, and all kinds of gangsterism generally. This is very

dangerous."[53] In a similar vein, two correspondents for *Moskovskie Novosti* complained "[i]t is not hard to see that Russia's influence in the Central Asian region has been steadily declining from year to year. Pushed out of the ruble zone and fenced in by customs posts and new borders, post-Soviet Asia is turning southward."[54] The malaise caused by the loss of Empire clearly kicked in at this time and, combined with the reverses of the Chechen conflict, served to undermine Yeltsin's popularity. It took the new shared discourse of the International War on Terror and a new leader, Vladimir Putin, to revive Russia's presence in the region as the new millennium dawned. Putin's War on International Terrorism in Chechnya became almost immediately an International War on Terrorism as the field of operations spread to Central Asia. From this position, Putin was able to respond to the attacks on New York and Washington of 9/11/2001 more rapidly and more confidently than any other European leader. For at least a while, he acted the part of international statesman to great effect. Reasserting some kind of Russian predominance in Central Asia was an important part of this, since it was Putin's readiness to approve the establishment of U.S. bases in Central Asia to support the new war in Afghanistan that made a genuine global coalition possible. This was not, however, an easy path for Russia, and the drift of the Central Asian states away from the Russian orbit in the course of the 1990s was never fully reversed.

---

53 Mikhail Karpov, "'My okazalis' v ochen' plokhoi geopoliticheskoi situatsii': Predsedatel' Komiteta Gosdumy po mezhdunarodnym delam Vladimir Lukin o politike RF na Dal'nem Vostoke i na Zapade," *Nezavisimaia Gazeta*, March 14, 1995, 1–2.

54 Azer Arif Ogl Mursaliev and Khasan Mustafaev, "Tikhaia voina za aziatskie kommunikatsii," *Moskovskie Novosti*, March 29, 1995.